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Monitor correspondent recalls own expulsions from Iran

Clashes between ministries led to ouster under Khomeini, Shah

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American journalist Gerald Seib's experience in Iran revives memories of this correspondent's own expulsion from Iran in December 1983.

At the time, I had entered Iran with a visa issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Once in Tehran, however, I was told by an official at the Islamic Guidance Ministry (which dictates practices in accordance with its interpretation of Islamic law) that I was not welcome and should leave the country immediately.

Caught in the cross fire between the two ministries, I was eventually arrested by plainclothes security agents and later expelled. The major difference with Mr. Seib's case is that I was never accused of being a spy.

Seib, a Wall Street Journal correspondent, was ordered expelled from Iran yesterday. He was seized last Saturday and later accused of being a "spy of the Zionist regime," referring to Israel.

Conflicts between different decision centers within Iran's ruling elite have been common since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Such feuds are part of a deeply rooted tradition in Iranian political life.

In 1975, under the Shah's regime, I was also caught in a bitter rift between civil servants at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the then Ministry of Information. On that occasion, too, I was forced to leave the country before being able to work.

Western diplomats contacted Wednesday in Tehran were reluctant to talk about Seib's detention. They say it's too early to say whether Seib was the victim of an internal Iranian feud. They said it remains very dangerous for American citizens to venture into Iran.

Mideast correspondents who regularly travel to Israel and to Arab countries hostile to Iran are at particular risk, the diplomats said. Indeed, many Iranian officials see their country at war not only with Iraq, but also with France and the US.

Recent revelations that the US Central Intelligence Agency had passed satellite pictures of the battlefield and of Iranian economic targets to Iraq has reinforced Iranian anger toward the US.

Last week's visit to Iran by a group of Western journalists, including several Americans, was organized by the Iranian government. But during interviews, I noticed that several militantly Islamic Iranians disapproved of the presence of US journalists in their country.

"All journalists working for American media have connections with the CIA," one official said bluntly.

Iranians seem obsessed by the idea of espionage and have a tendency to see foreign intelligence agents everywhere, sometimes with good reason.

On last week's trip, it seemed evident that Western intelligence-gathering efforts continue in Iran. Tehran-based Western diplomats regularly question journalists who have visited the war front. (Diplomats in Tehran are not allowed to travel outside the capital.) Western military attachés are particularly eager to secure information on the types of weapons used by Iran.

Iranian officials once showed this reporter pictures of their positions on the front that they said had been taken by a Western photographer. Those pictures were found on Iraqi prisoners of war, they claimed. "It is clear that the pictures had been sold to the Iraqi government," one said.

On our recent trip to the front, Iranian Revolutionary Guards were irked by the fact that at least two Western journalists had brought along very sophisticated military maps of the region around the Iraqi port of Basra and were trying to locate Iranian positions on their map.